

A Moment or a Movement?: Examining the Public Discourse on Early Childhood Education in K-3 Classrooms

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Abstract

With the rise of social media and increased mechanisms for sharing and accessing information, public attention is on early childhood education. In this article, I examine current media sources characterization of the early childhood debate and invite a conversation to rethink the way that culturally and linguistically diverse young children are positioned in schools. I argue that for widespread change to occur, the public discussion must be in tandem with a more critical examination of how a heightened attention to academic concepts and skills-based classrooms most negatively impacts the lived experiences of K-3 children from diverse communities and populations.

As an early childhood teacher educator and former K-3 teacher, I readily gravitate to the topic of young children. And so, anytime I have the opportunity—with family, friends, colleagues, students, talkative strangers—it is not uncommon for our conversation to lead to the topic of children and childhood. Over the years, one conversation has become eerily more frequent. Typically, it goes something like this:

I know a child who is so incredible—the child is curious, energetic, imaginative, loves playing and living intentionally. However, since elementary school began, something has changed. The teachers have expressed concern that the child’s inability to sit still on the rug prevents full concentration during reading time. In addition, the child comes home dragging feet in response to homework, and yet this lack of interest in print is surprising given the child’s inherent curiosity about the world. The conversation turns to the parent, caretaker, student teacher or loved one feeling as though something has been done wrong, convinced that it would all be better if this were caught earlier. The person is left wondering if the family might need additional services, resources or suggestions for best supporting the child.

While I am overgeneralizing the specifics, the stories are shockingly consistent: a disconnect between the curricular, contextual and behavioral expectations of school with the lived experiences of a young child. In the past, this conversation mostly centered around the challenges children from linguistically and racially diverse backgrounds face, as standardized and prescribed curricular models more frequently target urban or historically underresourced schools. As an African-American teacher and mother, indeed this conversation punctuates those tensions that ground my positionality and underscores

the relationship between curriculum and social inequity. An understanding of societal structures, such as racial, linguistic and economic inequity is as much a part of the work of teachers as a deep understanding of young children's development.

In recent years, in media outlets and academic literature, the audience has broadened; more are talking about the transformation of early childhood classrooms, spaces that have become unrecognizable in light of new curricular demands. In a widely cited study aptly titled, *Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?* Bassok, Lathem and Roren (2016), present empirical data that compares kindergarten classrooms between 1998 and 2010 to demonstrate that the heightened attention on academic content more prevalent in today's classroom better resembles what was once the expectation of first grade. As one example, they found that "the percentage of [kindergarten] teachers reporting that their class spends more than 3 hours daily on whole-class activities more than doubled, from 15% in 1998 to 32% in 2010" (p. 9). Additionally, the heightened attention on academic content—most notably literacy and math—eclipses practices historically associated with kindergartens such as play, art, physical education and socio-emotional development (Snow & Pizzolongo, 2014).

Indeed, the data is a startling affirmation that kindergarten, as families and teachers used to know it, is unrecognizable. Is kindergarten the new first grade? And, what did first grade do to get such a reputation as well? In this article, I examine the ways in which the question of what should count as early childhood has spilled into public discourse. Specifically, I look at how social media has evolved as an important space to raise consciousness about what constitutes early childhood education. Social media provides a virtual community to discuss the occurrences and policies that most impact

schools. While social media might offer a new space for public conversation, here, I attempt to suggest how to thread this public dialogue with those that have long occurred in the field of early education.

As we move towards necessary conversations to critically question early childhood education in the United States, I argue that this conversation has two additional lines worth examination: First, this conversation cannot be presented as a “new” phenomenon generalized to all young children. Rather, it must be in tandem with a more critical examination of how a heightened attention to academic concepts and skills-based classrooms have long impacted schools and children from traditionally marginalized communities (Spencer, 2014). By that term, I mean those that are often most likely to be at the center of educational policies (e.g., linguistically diverse children, Black/African-American children, families in poverty) whose voices are treated as peripheral in policymaking. As such, to rethink early childhood education, we must also address the ways in which inequity and assumptions about what counts as literacy and learning have long affected children from linguistically and racially diverse groups. Second, as advocates for young children our attention here cannot be myopic and limited only to kindergarten, as the previously referenced study —*Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?*—would suggest. Rather, if this is indeed a movement in early education, then we must widen our reach to rethink how *all* young children, including those in grades 1-3, experience school. As the internet provides an important space to extend conversations on early childhood, social media also can provide a less-traditional, and possibly more effective route, for social change. As such, it is critical to align the public discourse and research in the field.

Today's Public Discourse

If my social media feed is any indicator, then one could speculate that early childhood education is on the radar of the populous. Recent policies in the United States call for the expansion of “high-quality” early childhood programs and by high quality, policymakers generally mean “preschools that have demonstrated the largest social and academic gains for children” (Barnett & Frede, 2010, p. 21). With social media and increased mechanisms for sharing and accessing information, the gaze of the public on early education has begun to shift from policies to the practices of actual classrooms. Bassok, Lathem and Roren’s (2016) study has brought an empirical study on kindergarten to the fold, however, journalists, educators, child advocates, and families have been noting the erosion on kindergarten for some time now. Some popular blogs and journalists have written about many of the issues presented in Bassok, Lathem and Roren’s study. For example, Strauss’ blog for the Washington Post newspaper (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/>) frequently posts on early childhood to account for “just how academic it has become, with kids asked to sit in their seats and do academic work often with little or no recess or physical education, and with workloads that used to be in the later grades” (Strauss, 2016, n.p.). I argue that her 2014 post titled *Kindergarten Teacher: My Job is Now about Tests and Data — Not Children. I Quit* was a watershed moment, providing a veteran teacher the national platform to share her letter of resignation and rationale to leave the profession after 25 years of service. Sluyter (the teacher) poignantly writes:

I have watched as my job requirements swung away from a focus on the children, their individual learning styles, emotional needs, and their individual families, interests, and strengths to a focus on testing, assessing, and scoring young children, thereby ramping up the academic demands and pressures on them.

(Strauss, 2014, n.p.)

Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robinson (2009) have described a “participatory culture” where “the explosion of new media technologies make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (p. 3). For example, a study like Bassok, Lathem and Roren’s (2016) that was once almost exclusively written for researchers and policymakers, can now appear in blogs, social media profiles, and email links. As the frequency of public articles and blogs increase, additional perspectives and troubling trends emerge in the spotlight. The conversation shifts from the decades-old academic versus play debate to one that troubles the pedagogical rationale for standards, testing, and rights of young children. Blogs and articles have drawn lines between the rise in individualized education services like occupational therapy, learning evaluations and referrals for children who have difficulty sitting still or paying attention during reading (Hanscom, 2015, n.p.). Other posts address issues including: the perspectives of families when homework and academic content dominates a child’s curricular world, the sudden and immediate need to bring play back to preschools and invariably, articles pointing to Scandinavia as the pocket of innovation when it comes to the matter of educating young children (Strauss, 2016).

The recent spike in these types of public discussions is promising and exciting since they are not new to anyone who has dedicated their professional work to early childhood education. And while still too early to tell, optimism looms in 2015 as President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which brought the official end to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era and, some hope, the over-attention to standardized testing and the high-stakes testing paradigm that followed. However, with all of these blog posts, and re-posts and tweets, I ask: Are we just in a digital era moment—frustrated parents and educators finding newfound public spaces to talk back—or could this be a movement to reform early childhood education policy and practice? Indeed, I write this question, not with cynicism but with earnest wonder. Moreover, Dudley-Marling and Lucas (2009) aptly note a causal relationship between deficit assumptions about children and reform in school. “...Educators and educational policy makers [] accept explanations for academic failure that implicate the language and culture of poor children and their families as the cause of their academic struggles” (p. 367). To that end, I ask, how then might we ensure that the conversation about what counts as early childhood attends to those children whose lived experiences are positioned as lacking and thus makes them more vulnerable to policies that skew towards standardization, reductive pedagogies, and skills-based focus?

Early Education Reform Revisited

School populations that serve children and families from linguistically and racially diverse families have long been targeted in widespread policies and measures that call for greater accountability in early education. Genishi & Dyson (2009) lament the increased “homogenization and regimentation” of early childhood classrooms across the

country, but hardly the first time they or others have cautioned the standardization of early curriculum and teaching (n.p.). In the years since NCLB, researchers and practitioners note the effect of heavy-handed policies, often reducing classrooms to spaces where academic skills and mandated curriculum are heavily weighted. In their recent and influential report, Carlsson-Page, McLaughlin and Almon (2015) state that the emphasis on reading instruction in kindergarten can be seen as far back as the 1980s, however, “new approaches gained momentum like a snowball growing in volume and speed” (p.2). Children are being subjected to long hours of instruction in reading and math, teaching practices that heavily rely on rigid guidelines and curricular programs, and fewer opportunities to play—both in imaginative ways and outdoors. And all too often, the populations most vulnerable to such changes have been children who attend schools in linguistically, racially diverse, and underresourced communities, as financial and material resources accompanied these policies. In fact, research highlights diverse children engaging in multifaceted and playful language and literacy pursuits being marginalized by curricular policies and practices that value skills-based notions of literacy (for critiques see Dyson, 2010; Marsh, 2007).

Carlsson-Page, McLaughlin, and Almon (2015) continue their snowy metaphor when they write:

Under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) the snowball has escalated into an avalanche which threatens to destroy appropriate and effective approaches to early education. The kindergarten standards, in use in over 40 states, place huge emphasis on print literacy and state bluntly that, by the end of kindergarten, children are to “read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.”

Large amounts of time and money are being devoted to this goal, and its impact is felt strongly in many preschools as well. (p. 2)

The authors further their point to call for early childhood classrooms to instead be spaces where standardization is implausible due to the nature of inquiry- and play-based literacy learning. Carlsson-Page, McLaughlin, and Almon (2015) raise several points about the futility of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and their role in kindergarten classrooms. Research grounds the report, and the finding's grave concerns and caution for early childhood education are not new. And yet, researchers and educators that work with linguistically and racially diverse students have been warning about and this avalanche for decades (e.g., Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Meyer, 2002; Spencer, 2011). In this case, social media then provided a new audience and powerful space to bring this conversation—those from a middle class and/or an affluent backgrounds. Online forums like facebook, twitter and personal blogs allow users to have a public space to share policy links, express dissatisfaction with school changes, and call on community members to mobilize or respond to local changes. While this unfortunate change in early education impacts all families and while many of the results of these problematic policies are yet to be fully known, it is critical to underline the ways in which such practices most severely impact traditionally marginalized groups.

What Does this Mean for Linguistically and Racially Diverse Young Children?

Linguistically and racially diverse school communities have long challenged the over extension of skill-based curricula and so-called academic programs in early childhood. At first glance, one could argue, if these conditions have existed for some time, what—if anything—has changed? How could it possibly get any worse? In recent

years, alarming data have revealed that school suspensions are on the rise as zero-tolerance behavior policies often have come in tandem with increased “academic” standards. In a 2015 executive summary report for the Center for Academic Progress, Adamu and Hogan write:

At the same time that many states and communities across the country are committing to expanding high-quality early learning opportunities, alarming statistics suggest that early childhood learning environments are a point of entry to the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly for African American children. Preschoolers—children ages 3 to 5—are especially vulnerable to punitive and non-developmentally appropriate disciplinary measures. (p.1)

Moreover, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, “Black children make up 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children suspended more than once. Boys receive more than three out of four out-of-school preschool suspensions” (p. 1).

Thus, we have, two parallel public conversations happening about early childhood education. As I previously mentioned, there is a vocal outcry against the academic kindergarten that has parents and educators revealing critical stories and relying upon research to trouble what counts as appropriate practice for an early childhood classroom. Indeed, the argument that grounds this debate provides a counternarrative, which for many resonates with other movements in early education that have a history of critiquing some taken for granted assumptions about research, pedagogy and practice in early childhood (Bloch, 1987; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). These arguments have been made with attention to young children and families from diverse school communities

because the effect of factors like institutionalized racism and inequity bear so heavily on curricular and pedagogical inequity. I suggest a tandem argument that ties these discipline policies and inappropriate “academic” content together. That is, as the qualifications and expectations for what counts as early childhood classrooms fundamentally shifts, so too do the experiences and expectations of young children to perform and to do school in very specific ways. The Advancement Project (2010), a civil rights law action think tank, asserts that zero tolerance policies represent “a fundamental misunderstanding of child and adolescent development...it is increasingly the youngest and most vulnerable children who are being subjected to the blunt force of these policies and practices” (p. 14). Thus, for the public outcry to represent all children, the argument should be directed towards both the unrealistic and ineffective expectations being placed on early childhood educators and children, as well a clear demonstration of how these expectations are often tied to disciplinary measures that most affect children and families from historically marginalized populations.

The Oldest Young Children

All too often, the children at the oldest end of the early childhood spectrum get positioned as elementary school and subjected to those policies that impact K-12 classrooms (e.g., CCSS). As the public asks, *Is Kindergarten the New First Grade?* (Bassok, Lathem & Roren, 2016) the question implicitly suggests that it is appropriate for first grade to be the space where highly “academic” standards are appropriate. What makes a standard inappropriate for kindergarten, but of perfect sense for first grade? In literacy instruction, for example, one CCSS foundational reading standard requires kindergarten students to “Associate the long and short sounds with the common spellings

(graphemes) for the five major vowels” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, n.p.). For each of the early elementary grades, the standard evolves in its complexity, expecting a third-grade child to apply complex phonetic principles to standard academic English. In so doing, the CCSS applies an “earlier is better” approach to these skills, despite research that has consistently demonstrated that this only yields short-term understandings and results on standardized tests measures (Katz, 2015).

Schools are always operating with a vested interest in the broader socioeconomic landscape of the times. Indeed, we have a long history of educational policy, research and practice prioritizing an emphasis on psychology, the power of science, and the mechanization of the teaching and learning process (Kliebard, 1995). What stands out about this moment in time, however, is the way that our current landscape further shifts who qualifies as young children. While some researchers have worked on how to reconceptualize what “counts” as early childhood education (Bloch, 2013), most seem to agree that this period can be loosely categorized by the time period from birth to age 8. And yet, as schools try to transplant policies, standards, and expectations from elementary school into kindergarten, first, second and third grade, we erode the broad principles that ground and define this time in the life of a child as rightful childhood. The early years are a period in a child’s life where learning must include “a wide range of experiences, opportunities, resources and contexts that will provoke, stimulate, and support children’s innate intellectual dispositions” (Katz, 2015, n.p.). In this sense, the atmosphere and expectations that justify “academic” kindergarten are equally problematic across first-, second- and third-grade classrooms as well. Indeed, children are

not miniature adults (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001) and early childhood is not simply pre-elementary school either.

It seems appropriate at this point to note, that many studies of early literacy have long argued that the ability to negotiate and use language and literacy in context-specific ways as integral to any learning environment (e.g., Ballenger, 1999; Comber & Simpson, 2001; Dyson, 2003; Falchi, Axelrod & Genishi, 2013; Siegel, 2006). In that sense, while one child might enter elementary school printing “many upper- and lower-case letters” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, n.p.), another child might be better prepared to engage in the complex intellectual challenge of negotiating a conflict with a peer during a cooperative learning period (a true demonstration of linguistic aptitude!). Rather than prioritizing one of these “skills” over the other, we might instead see both examples of a range of goals that might take shape and vary over a broader stretch of time. In that sense, fueling a public debate that only focuses on kindergarten feels incomplete. Instead, the conversation must be inclusive to a broader definition of what counts as literacy, for example, and to the intellectual complexities of this critical period in a child’s lifetime.

Social Media or Change?

In today’s times, there are many topics—beyond education— that have had their social media moment. By moment, I mean a time where a conversation is particularly relevant online and users engage in the “ethos of web 2.0” a type of communication marked by communication, participation, and content exchange (Knobel & Wilber, 2009). In describing these instances as a moment, my intent is not to downplay the significance. Sharing an article or a newspaper column (like Strauss’ Answer Sheet) that

consistently challenges narrow perspectives can be highly informing in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions. However, how can this critical public discourse about childhood affect change in schools?

It is an exciting time for early childhood to be in the public spotlight and for early childhood educators to have a range of modalities to write and to engage others in collective action. With a public expressing concern with the current state of early childhood education—most notably the “academic” kindergarten—we have a unique opportunity to engage further, calling explicit attention to the historical inequities that have long existed in our field. That is, how might we use this opportunity to consider how current policies most impact linguistically and racially diverse children and those in kindergarten, first, second and third-grade classrooms. For early childhood educators, this means talking back explicitly to the political nature of schools and schooling and this is no easy task when most teachers are reluctant to consider the role that systemic racism and inequity have played in U.S. education (Picower, 2012). In sum, for these conversations to move from a moment to actual movement and change, we must disrupt the assumption that this is a new phenomenon in our field and instead challenge the inequalities that are pervasive here and point to those children who are being disproportionately affected by them.

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